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## **#LivingDeath, exhibition at the Natural Sciences Museum of Valencia (Spain)**

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### **Introduction**

At the University of Valencia we have a Mention in "Art and Humanities" for Primary School Teachers Training. We use Work Projects in the matter "Educational Proposals in Art Education". The projects that have emerged during 2018 arises from the cultural thematic "Death". To carry out the project we start from the work of women artists, with special attention to the French artist Sophie Calle, and her exhibition at the *Musée de la Chasse et la Nature* (Paris), when she uses art to overcome grief over the loss of her father and her cat. Students complete a series of art works, incorporating objects, paintings, photographs and other elements to build their installations. These works have been exhibited at the Natural Sciences Museum of Valencia. The hashtag exhibition #LivingDeath promote interaction with the audiences that visit the exhibition. Each phase of the project is observed for study the results. Works are located in the course of the museum. The viewer must "search" the works, and the surprise effect gives a ludic air to the visit, connecting university and museum. We assumes the roles of artist, researcher and teacher during the process. Students become empowered by the intense look of art, creating, thinking and producing. We develop projects from attractive and innovative themes based on concepts; this topics helps to reflect on problems that are current and maintain a historical perception. Can use devices from art to think about school, dialoguing from experiences and possible relationships between museum and education, involving people, connecting them in cultural mediation networks.

### **New topics for teachers training with experiences in museums**

The project "Death" questions a taboo subject that does not appear in teachers training curriculum. Students concrete their ideas through visual poetics for the museum. My students do not want to be artists, they are going to be teachers. I try to live the artistic experience intensely. In previous courses we have worked on "Fear" (Foucault, 2012), "Memory" (Le Goff, 1996), or "Body" (Butler, 2015), as sophisticated concepts and

cultural constructions. Every year the students' works are exhibited in a museum. In "Death", students assume that they can make art with simple objects, making artistic installations, incorporating drawings and photographs, finding the poetics of the object, transiting through visual poetry. In the workshop we advise students in the selection of materials, the union of constructive elements, and the aesthetic textures. The fact of proposing topics close to their interests helps them to reflect on problems that are current. At the same time maintain a historical journey, such as the struggle for Human Rights and Ecology. We can use devices from the field of art to think about school, dialoguing in the field of experiences and relationships between art, museums, science and education, defending participatory activities, involving people, connecting them in cultural mediation networks.

### **Death. An education project in collaboration with the Museum of Natural Sciences**

The works are located in the course of the museum, which is an important collection of fossils. When the viewer discover the works, the surprise effect gives a ludic air to the visit. The innovative facet implies a hybridization between visual arts and natural sciences. The exhibition connect the two most important institutions of the city: university and town hall. We promote an educational curatorship that turns the museum into an educational experiment from the arts (Rogoff, 2008), using Artography and Arts Based Educational Research (Rolling, 2017). Teacher and students assumes the roles of artist, researcher and teacher. Students make installations using recycling elements and objects. Sculptures, installations and performative actions that will serve to transmit a new look towards "death". During the project's implementation phase, the idea of being able to publicly teach its facilities positively affects the interest to be innovative (Nardi, 2008). The museum is a privileged environment for education. We provoke an effort of imagination, combined with a rigorous knowledge, interpreting reality. When we are preparing the actions, the museum management must be asked for permission, committing itself not to damage any installation, and leaving all in perfect conditions. This effort of coordination supposes a good way to transmit the respect towards the public spaces. The surprise effect arises when the rest of the students verify that they have been intervened places. With these actions, a greater use of the equipment is claimed, turning places into artistic exhibition. The surprise effect is one of the characteristics that maintains the interest to discover the installations in strategic places. Use of spaces is an artographic element.

## Exhibiting the students' productions in the Museum of Natural Sciences

After realizing the projects we verified the good level of the artistic work carried out by the future teachers. Through artistic installations they reflect their ideas about death. Students have been empowered by the intense look of art. When they finish their work, they verify that they were able to transmit their ideas through the arts. Students assume that art can be made with simple objects, make a series of artistic installations, taking into account the possibility of incorporating all kinds of objects and elements.



Figure 1. *The Last Look* (the tombstones can be opened, to see our face reflected in a mirror).

An important aspect to be highlighted in the preparation of the project are the previous visit to the museum, to know the spaces, to talk with head, educators, and technical team. They are very profitable visits, since the doubts of the students are solved to define where they will locate their works. The aspects of technical coordination had been previously prepared in the classroom, so that in a single day all the pieces could be assembled, some of them of large dimensions.



Figure 2. *Eating death*, as a picnic tomb, tells us about the food in funeral rituals.

Installations are located along the route of the museum's permanent exhibition. Installations have been distributed throughout the museum, so that the viewer must “look for them” in each room. The surprise effect of this approach gives a more playful and discovery to the visit. The 18 works of the project “Death” have been exhibited in the Museum of Natural Sciences during three months in 2018. The good result of the pieces and their repercussion among the numerous attending public allows us to analyze the new

look towards the art that the students have experienced. The creative and innovative facet of the project supposes a direct contact with the museum, one of the most visited of the city. This museum is a place that talks about life through traces of dead animals. The exhibition offers us the opportunity to show the artistic works in a privileged place. We defend a model of exhibitions in museums that favored the educational. By encouraging students to “appropriate” the museum space, we are favoring a direct relationship. Death is a taboo subject in many aspects. We use the possibilities of art as an educational argument, as a force capable of revolutionizing society, as a breath that inspires changes and social improvements (Huerta & Hernández, 2015).



Figure 3. *Death does not discriminate*, in which the subject are the phases of life.

The installation *The Last Look*, presents three tombstones at three different heights on the wall. The tombstones can be opened, and we see our own face reflected in a mirror. The main idea is to accept death as a daily process, and to eliminate all taboo. The fact of seeing oneself in a mirror inside a tomb impacts the visitor. In the project *Colors of Death*, mourning in different cultures is represented with different colors. The installation *We Are Flowers and Seeds* vindicates the disappeared during the Franco dictatorship, made with transparent pots in which there are flowers and objects that remind the missing people. *Eating Death* argues that food is closely linked to the time of death, as a cultural custom is to bring together families and friends around a table with food to remember and talk about the deceased person. *The Tree of Death* represents the link between life and death in perpetual evolution.



Figure 4. *Caged*, installation with a cage with doll and a wreath of flowers.

The installation *Caged* shows us the pressure and abuse that is exerted on the bodies of women. *Perfect Wife* represent in a crude and direct way what they consider a death in life for women, stigmatized negatively and pejoratively for not wanting to be a mother at an age determined. Most of my students are women. I always incorporate art made by women in the classroom.



Figure 5. Installation *Assassins of the Environment*.

In *Assassins of the Environment* planet dies, killed by the population. The piece show us the negative impact of human beings on the environment. They remind us that we are responsible for the degradation of the planet, but also can save it. The piece *Between light and darkness* represents death from different images, and the passage of time through a set of bones. Light and darkness are two sisters who play with chaos and order. The work includes a Guestbook in which people can write “What I would not like to die”.

To put a finishing touch to the experience, the Museum of Natural Sciences organized a thematic concert on “Death”, with songs from different periods, which took place throughout the course of the exhibition, with a song performed before each work. To develop the experience and disseminate it in networks, the hashtag #VivirLaMuerte (#LivingDeath) has been used, making the exhibition known through images, encouraging the public to take selfies in front of the pieces and send their messages through the networks. On May 18, 2018, to celebrate World Museum Day, with the slogan "Hyperconnected Museums, New Approaches, New Publics", the City Council of Valencia proposed to the students to speak attendees, making connections between art and science, education and contemporary art.

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## Short author biographical note

PhD Ricard Huerta is Professor of Art Education in the University of Valencia (Spain). Director of Museari [www.museari.com](http://www.museari.com) an online museum for Human Rights. Is regular member at the *Institute of Creativity and Educational Innovation*, and member of ICOM and InSEA. Director of the master “Art Education and Museums”. Graduate in Fine Arts, Music, and Communication. Director of the international project *Women Teacher*. Head director of the Research Journal *EARI Educación Artística Revista de Investigación*. Invited researcher in universities of France, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, Cuba, Uruguay, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Argentina and Chile.

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